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Plastic Bag Ban Research

Background to the Research

This executive summary details the findings of the third phase of research into the Plastic Bag Ban in South Australia, conducted by the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute at the University of South Australia, in partnership with Zero Waste SA. The research was conducted in June 2009. It builds upon the research conducted prior to the ban's implementation in October 2008 and in March 2009 that evaluated the phasing in period of the ban and accompanying communications.

This third piece of research aims to understand South Australian householders' behaviour and perceptions towards the ban now that it has been implemented. It also seeks to identify how behaviours toward and perceptions of plastic bags and the ban have changed since implementation. The Phase 1 research provides benchmark data for this evaluation.

502 respondents participated in the Phase 3 research, comprising two groups. The first sample group consisted of 253 respondents who had participated in the Phase 1 benchmark study. Recontacting the *same* individuals allows for issues of causality in behaviour change to be examined and avoids sampling error affecting the results. The second sample group comprised 254 randomly selected South Australians, residing in the state at least 50% of the time and who are responsible for at least half of their household's grocery shopping. These respondents were selected to ensure a representative cross-section of residents living in both metropolitan and regional areas of South Australia. This second sample group acts as a 'control' group. In general, there were very few differences between the new and re-contacted sample, which is a positive finding showing that the re-contact component of the research did not just attract those who were 'atypical' in their behaviour and attitudes.

Bag Usage and Ownership

Overall, more than nine in 10 respondents claimed to take their own bags shopping compared to approximately six in 10 of all respondents in Phase 1. *This shows a significant change in behaviour*. The proportion overall claiming to use only store provided bags has dropped from 18% in Phase 1 to just 1% in Phase 3.

This change in behaviour is recent for many respondents with three in 10 Phase 3 respondents claiming it was a behaviour change within the last three months. This is further evidence of a shift in behaviour directly associated with the ban's implementation.

In terms of the number of shopping bags respondents claimed to own, the mean was 10 with a median of eight and mode of ten. The median of 8 reflects that there are a few respondents in the sample who own well in excess of 10 bags and this is driving the mean upwards. These results are the same as seen in Phase 1 and indicate that, in terms of the amount of bags owned to meet their shopping needs, people who have adopted the behaviour recently are behaving just like those who have been taking their bags for a long time.

Eight in 10 respondents said they kept bags in their car. More than nine in 10 respondents claimed they took their own bags on their last grocery shopping trip, and did not require any store bags.

Own Bags in Other Shopping Contexts

Two in 10 respondents claimed to never use their own bags for non-supermarket items. This is down from the five in 10 of Phase 1. Four in 10 respondents claimed to use their own bags 10 out of 10 times, up from the quarter of respondents in Phase 1. On average, respondents claimed to take their own shopping bags with them for other shopping contexts in 5.7 trips out of ten. Overall, these results show an increase in the claimed use of the shoppers' own bags outside of the grocery context since the ban came into effect.

General goods, electrical and apparel were the most common retail items that respondents said they take their own shopping bags for, outside of the grocery context. One quarter of respondents also claimed to take their own bags for non-grocery food and liquor as well as pharmacy or chemist shopping. The rank order of mention is the same as was seen in the Phase 1 results, reflecting stability in the contexts where shoppers take their own bags. So, the proportion of shoppers taking their bags into other retail settings has increased but the key settings have remained stable.

Awareness & Perceptions of the Ban & Support for the Ban

Respondents were first asked to assess whether they felt they had changed their own behaviour as a result of the ban. The question was multiple-response and so the response proportions total to more than 100%. Overall, three in 10 respondents did not feel their behaviour had changed as a result of the ban. The vast majority of these respondents (more than nine in 10) claimed they take their own bags shopping, so these respondents were already compliant prior to the ban. Just less than four in 10 respondents said they were taking reusable bags/boxes more often while another quarter said they had started to take them when they weren't before.

For half of respondents, the main message they received from the media about the plastic bag ban is the need to be environmentally responsible. Only 7% of respondents claimed not to have heard anything about the bag ban in the media. These results are very similar to those of Phase 2, which focused on evaluating advertising and media recall and messages.

Support for the ban has remained high and positive since its implementation. Using a '0' to '10' scale, where '0' was 'not at all supportive' and '10' was 'completely supportive', more than half of the respondents were 'completely supportive' (10/10) of the plastic bag ban. Three quarters of respondents claimed to be highly supportive of the ban (8/10 rating or higher). The mean level of support for the ban was 8.4/10, with only 4% claiming to be 'not at all supportive' (0/10) of the ban.

In Phase 1, the mean level of support was 8.2 and in Phase 2 it was. 7.7 These results show that the mean level of support has stayed stable, and in fact increased slightly since the phasing in of the ban.

Impact of the Ban

The majority (82%) of respondents believed that the ban is having an impact. Only 6% of respondents believed that the ban is having no impact.

Respondents were asked the nature of the perceived impact. The question was multiple response. Six in 10 respondents that thought the ban is having an impact believed that this was in reducing litter and/or reducing landfill. Approximately 15% of respondents believed that the ban is saving resources, reducing the impact on waterways and/or reducing the impact on marine life. Only 7% of the respondents who believed that the bag ban is having an impact thought that it is too early to tell what kind of impact it is having.

South Australian Leadership

Almost seven out of 10 respondents were highly supportive (8/10 and above) of the statement that 'the bag ban shows South Australia as a leader in environmental issues'. The average support level was 8.1/10, which also shows strong support for this statement. Only 9% of respondents believed that the bag ban does not show South Australia as a leader in environmental issues (score of 4 or lower).

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